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THE "LESBIAN" NUN OF JUDITH BROWN: A DIFFERENT CONCLUSION

by Rudolph M. Bell*

Benedetta Carlini, a mystic and visionary who rose from countryside origins to become abbess of the Theatine convent known as Holy Mary of Pescia (Tuscany), was a "lesbian." For her crimes she was imprisoned for thirty-five years until her death in 1661, at the age of seventy-one. Abbess Benedetta's fascinating story is reconstructed by historian Judith C. Brown in Immodest Acts: The Life of a Lesbian Nun in Renaissance Italy (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

According to Brown, Sister Benedetta was subjected to two "investigations." The first, conducted by local church officials, began on 27 May, 1619, the very day after she became Christ's bride in a public ceremony to which she had invited the leading citizens of Pescia to join the convent nuns as witnesses. During fourteen clearly dated and thoroughly documented interrogations of Benedetta and several other sisters listed by name, evidence emerged on a wide array of spiritual graces manifest in the holy woman: an exchange of mystical love during which Jesus removed her heart (leaving a void that her companion could feel) and returned three days later, accompanied by a throng of saints, to replace it with his own larger one; stigmata, from which blood flowed freely, received as she lay in bed; a crown of thorns; and a golden wedding band from her spiritual marriage. On each of their visits the investigators checked and rechecked the physical evidence, and also explored the doctrinal correctness of her many visions and ecstatic experiences. Notwithstanding some troublesome questions, these men concluded that

*I am most grateful to Corso Boccia for assistance with documents at the Archivio di Stato at Florence; to Dr. Alda Spotti, head paleographer of the manuscript division of the Biblioteca Nazionale di Roma, for sharing her expertise with me; to Cristina Ciccaglioni and Laura Tomici for advice on translation questions; to Martha Howell, Herbert Rowen, and Donald Weinstein for comments on earlier versions of this essay; and to the Rutgers Research Council for financial support.
Benedetta "appeared to be a true visionary," and in July 1620 she was "reinstated as abbess" (p. 99).

Over the next two or three years "nothing sufficiently noteworthy to merit written mention occurred in the Theatine convent" (p. 100). Abbess Benedetta successfully led a "double life" as an administrator and a mystic, fulfilling "both roles adequately enough to satisfy local officials and the nuns under her charge" (p. 100). Then, sometime between August 1622 and March 1623, for reasons that are not documented, the newly appointed papal nuncio, Alfonso Giglioli, Bishop of Anglona, "sent several of his officials to investigate Benedetta's claims" (p. 105). They concluded that "it was [highly—'grandissima probabilita'] probable that though she was a good servant of God, she was deluded by the Devil" (p. 105), and they urgently recommended further inquiry (p. 110). The nuncio agreed and sent them back for another visit.

This time a veritable avalanche of damaging testimony emerged about Abbess Benedetta, the most stunning charge being that for two years she had engaged in mutual masturbation with her companion Bartolomea. What before had seemed highly probable now was certain: "Benedetta's visions and ecstasies are demonic illusions" (p. 110). From a later report, dated November 5, 1623, we learn that Benedetta "now agreed that she had been deceived by the devil" (p. 129). The authors of this report concluded that all of her deeds and experiences, both the sinful and the seemingly miraculous, had been done without her consent or her will; apparently she no longer was possessed and she now "lived the life of an obedient nun" in quietude and humility, setting a good example for the others (p. 129). The case apparently did not end on this forgiving note, however. Based upon a brief mention nearly four decades later in a fragment of one nun's "diary," Brown suggests that in 1626 Benedetta was "sentenced" to life imprisonment within the convent (pp. 132–33).

Throughout her reconstruction of the case of Abbess Benedetta Carlini, Brown places great emphasis on the "lesbian" behavior. Not only the book's title and subtitle but also the introduction, the epilogue, and the chapter titled "The Second Investigation" are devoted to this aspect of her life. Nor is such emphasis unwarranted; however important or unimportant sexual behavior may have been in the case itself (a matter to which I shall return), the fact remains that the documents discovered by Brown are, as she claims, "unique" in providing "a detailed description of her [Benedetta's] sexual relations with another nun" and "invaluable for analyzing hitherto unexplored
areas of women’s sexual lives” (p. 4). Benedetta’s more ordinary experiences as a mystic are also interesting, and if readers attracted to a book with the word “lesbian” on the cover end up by learning something about female spirituality and the Catholic Reformation, so much the better; but specialists in this area will not find much that is new.

Precisely because the documents are virtually unique for what they may tell us about lesbian sexuality, they merit very close examination. Here it is appropriate to thank the Renaissance Quarterly editors for their patience. Originally they had asked for a 500-word review of Brown’s book, and I accepted; Immodest Acts arrived and from the outset it intrigued me, both for Brown’s narrative skill and for the story itself. And yet several issues seemed puzzling. Having the good fortune of being nearby the Archivi, I decided to look more deeply into the case of Benedetta Carlini.

Apart from the fragments of a nun’s “diary” located at the Archivio di Stato in Pisa and a few folios related to mundane administrative matters, all the relevant documents are located in Miscellanea Medicea, 376, insert 28, at the Archivio di Stato in Florence. In the Appendix of Immodest Acts Brown lists the documents in that file which she deems to be “pertinent” (p. 140). Her descriptions are summarized below, along with comments by me, a code letter for ease of later reference, and frame numbers (each recto and verso on a separate frame) for the microfilm of the file that I made.¹

The Order of Documents A through I is that given by Brown, whereas those she excluded are listed in what I judge to be their proper chronological sequence. The frame numbers provide the order of the documents as they were in the file when it was filmed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Frames</th>
<th>Brown (pp. 141–42)</th>
<th>Bell’s Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

¹The microfilm itself is available from the Alexander Library of Rutgers University (Special Collections). It also includes the two frames from Corporazioni Religiose Soppressa, number 924, S. Domenico di Pescia, Archivio di Stato di Pisa, that describe the deaths of Benedetta and of her companion Bartolomea (to be considered further along in this essay).
B 56–80 Untitled document containing the results of fifteen ecclesiastical investigations made between 27 May, 1619 and 26 July, 1620. Conducted by the two Capuchin Fathers addressed in Documents G and H.

C 155–62 “Brief Discourse” critical of Benedetta, probable date between Aug. 1622 and Mar. 1623. Authored by the officials who wrote Document D; there are three copies.

163–69 170–75

D 29–55 “Abstract of the Trial of Benedetta”—“stamped with the nunzio’s seal”; written after Mar. 1623 and before Nov. 1623. There is no seal of a nuncio or anyone else on either copy; a topical evaluation based on Documents B, C, and E.

138–54

E 81–85 “Account of the visit made to the Theatine nuns . . .” The handwriting is identical with that of document B.

F 28 “Last Report”—dated November 5, 1623. No indication that it is a “Last” Report.

G 110 Letter from the nuncio to two Capuccin Fathers, wishing them well on their assigned task. Dated 13 December, 1623. Addressed to PP. Soragna and Pistoia, it is the only document with a seal. Perhaps the intended date is 23 December, 1623.

H 109 Letter from the nuncio to the above on difficulties in finding a confessor for the Theatines. Dated 17 December, 1623. Although the “X7 di Xbri 1623” is the most obvious reading, internal content suggests an ante-Document G date.


This completes the list of “pertinent” documents included in the Appendix of Brown’s book. In my judgment, however, all the doc-
A copy of the “Relazione di Benedetta da Villano, havuta dall. A.A.” Contains Benedetta’s first-person account of her youth and early ecstasies, as well as her spiritual marriage and related experiences into July of 1619. “A.A.” refers to Alfonso Giglioli, Bishop of Anglona, a fact that Brown must have been aware of when she cited this document (“Relazione di Benedetta da Vellano, havuta dal A.A.A. [sic] Vescovo d’Anglona” on p. 177 n. 15 and p. 192 n. 2). Moreover, she attributes an account of early illness (p. 184 n. 23) and a lengthy quotation on receiving the stigmata (p. 187 n. 32) to documents that do not contain such material, whereas the descriptions are in this very document (frames 5 and 6). It appears that Brown may not have realized that “A.A.” is the same person who emerges again in the 1622–23 documents as the papal nuncio who she believes “reopened” the case (p. 105). Although Document J is undated, its highly supportive tone clearly sets it among the early documents concerning Benedetta. Of all the writings in the file, this is the one that comes closest to portraying her as a would-be saint. That a bishop on his way to becoming a papal nuncio should be involved from the outset in the cause of a seemingly holy nun who turned out to be a “lesbian” is a matter I shall consider further along. The exact extent of his involvement must remain uncertain since the word “havuta” is ambiguous, but I seriously doubt that anyone would have bothered merely to state where they picked up a copy of this document and named an influential bishop who had had nothing to do with either compiling, preserving, or promoting it.

“Nel 1619 Iesus Maria. Giorno della Santiss. ma Trinita . . .” An undated and untitled six-page report on Benedetta’s early experiences, including her mystical marriage and apocalyptic pronouncements about the plague and Pescia. While it is not in the first-person of Benedetta, it does slip into the first-person of other nuns re-
porting what Benedetta said while she was in ecstasy. Although Brown does not cite this document in an explicit way, one reference (p. 192 n. 5) and several undocumented statements in the text may well allude to it. Document K gives no indication of its author, and therefore we cannot attribute it directly to "A.A."; however, it surely belongs among the credulous writings of that period.

L 86–108 A mixed packet of small scraps of paper, loose pages, and short folios in several hands, none with dates or absolute signs of authorship, but most apparently originating with her confessor. Includes everything from a list of angels and their specialties (frame 97) to a compilation of sayings above the convent’s various doors (frame 108); heavily concerned with directing Benedetta to obey her confessor and instructing her on how to distinguish divine from diabolic visions (frames 90–96 and 98–105). An important document in this set, at least for the analysis that follows, is the one (frames 106–107) that invokes the authority of Lionora [Eleonora] Medici in commanding all the nuns to obey their Mother Abbess and to show her reverence.

M 111–12 February 10, 1620. A separate folio from her confessor recommending that Benedetta combat her spiritual aridity and lack of internal peace with mortification and destruction of her will. Frame 112 probably refers to a somewhat later date, and tells of an ecstasy during which she is in paradise with the angels and saints.

N 119–22 Undated advice from her confessor telling Benedetta to aim for heavenly and not earthly rewards; tells her that she soon will be going to heaven. Refers to serious discord at the convent and gives instruction on how to confess well.

O 123–25 July 13, 1621 (frames 123–24) and July 21, 1621. The earlier date records a vision of a procession of Dominican Saints, led by Catherine of Siena; in the latter, Benedetta is in ecstasy and finds herself in the company of God the Father, Jesus, and the Madonna.
P 126–36 Begins “In the year 1620 . . . 14 July . . .” but clearly narrates tribulations over many succeeding months. Benedetta takes to heart her confessor’s warning that she must not become known as “Maladetta” and vows to curb her impatience with the nuns under her charge (frame 126). She identifies strongly with the quintessential female sinner, Mary Magdalen (frame 127), and fears she may be deceived (frame 128). Later on she invokes the aid of the Virgin Mary to help her govern the convent (frame 132), and in another vision (frame 134) she joins Mary in combat, battles, wars, threats, and temptations—all words and circumstances that do not appear in her earlier visions. Brown alludes briefly to some of these difficulties (p. 102–104) but the absence of any citation of Documents L, M, N, O, and P makes it impossible to know how she evaluated them.

Q 137 Report to the “Illsmono e Revsmo Mons”
As with Document I, it gives four reasons why Benedetta is estimated (‘s’ é stimato che . . . sia”) to be deceived by the Devil: 1) misbehavior with a priest; 2) false stigmata; 3) smearing blood on a crucifix; and 4) living “dishonestly” with her female companion for two years. States that much could be added, but that this should be enough, at least on paper.

In the light of this complete list of the documents relating to Benedetta Carlini, let us proceed with a fuller development of what this case may tell us about female sexuality.

The word “lesbian,” which appears prominently in Brown’s book but never in the documents, is one source of confusion. It is most easily resolved by reference to Brown’s endnote number 54 (pp. 171–73), where she tells the reader that she uses this term merely for literary “convenience,” and that she is “in agreement” with those who argue that it “should not be applied to women who lived before its emergence as a cultural category in the late nineteenth century.” Thus, none of the issues that would be involved in a conscious, cultural self-identification as a lesbian are relevant to an understanding of Benedetta Carlini.

Another source of confusion, less easily rectified, is the question of how many investigations or “trials” Benedetta underwent, and how
these were conducted. In the list of documents in the Appendix, and in various ways throughout the text, Brown renders the Italian term "processo" as "trial," whereas in the chapter titles she gives the more appropriate translation of "investigation." Either rendition is possible, depending on the context, but in this case the documents are unambiguous. Benedetta Carlini never was brought to trial (and, I will argue shortly, never "sentenced"). The "processo" she underwent in 1619 was the only one that ever occurred. It listed the names of those who testified, the dates, and the physical evidence observed. It was not a trial, however, nor even a particularly formal "processo," because it recorded almost none of the questions asked, did not name the presiding officials, did not provide any counsel for the individual under suspicion, and did not specify any charges. It is typical of numerous "processi" undertaken as rather informal and preliminary inquiries into the spiritual claims of female Italian Reformation mystics. Some of these were followed by a real trial on explicit charges, usually of heresy and/or witchcraft, but very common was the outcome of Benedetta's case: no clear termination or conclusion. Even an informal "processo," however, might result in punishment. Contrary to Brown's assertion that Benedetta initially was exculpated, Document B (frame 79) states that until July of the following year (1620) the good nun was ordered to observe total "clausura," thus cutting her off completely from the outside world.

Nor did her male superiors simply treat the case as closed. Father Ricordati, a former lawyer and a priest of long experience, to be sure was favorably inclined toward Benedetta, but there was no one better prepared by his great learning and close relationship as her Father Confessor to monitor her spiritual experiences carefully. His efforts are recorded in Documents L, M, N, O, and P. These reveal an abbess who had serious problems from the outset in establishing her authority over the nuns under her charge, who had to invoke the earthly command of the Medici family to get them to treat her with proper "reverence," who came to visualize her convent as a battle-ground and identified herself with the Virgin Mary in waging warfare.

Benedetta's interior spiritual life fared little better. From the heights of a mystical marriage with Christ she plummeted to the depths of feeling abandoned by God, a phase of aridity that is very common in the vitae of female mystics, but one that this abbess failed to overcome. Brown discusses briefly this time of crisis (p. 102) and
attributes it primarily to Benedetta’s sense of loss over her father’s death. Indeed, Brown cites a vision by Benedetta of her dead father in purgatory to supply an approximate date for Document D (pp. 199–200 n. 14); however, I am unable to locate any reference here to her dead earthly father, only to her live Father Confessor (frame 84 for Document E, upon which Document D is based, and frames 53–54 or 152–53 for Document D). While Giuliano Carlini’s death may have contributed to Benedetta’s feelings of abandonment, my reading of the case would place greater emphasis on difficulties within the convent world she had forged for herself many years earlier.

The “processo” of 1619 punished Benedetta by denying her contact with a public whose adulation she had sought with manifestly unseemly self-praise and publicity. No sooner was she reinstated as abbess a year later than the nuns became disrespectful, disobedient, and unreverential toward her. Her Father Confessor, with his pedantic warnings about false visions and his formulaic urgings to think of heavenly and not earthly rewards, gave her little consolation. Even her God seemed to abandon her as she wandered lost in a spiritual desert. Denied all the confirmation and support she once had known, Abbess Benedetta fraudulently renewed her stigmata with a needle, pasted on her forehead a gold star that she had cut out from foil, and passed hour after hour at the communion grate holding hands, laughing, and stealing kisses with a priest who was also a distant relative of hers. And, of course, for two years she found physical comfort and love in the arms of her companion at the convent, one Bartolomea Crivelli.

Brown asserts that between 1620 and 1623 there was “a long conspiracy of silence” (p. 114) and tries to explain “why no one said anything until three years later” (p. 115). She concludes that the combined pressures of wishing to avoid a scandal and fear of Benedetta and her local supporters explain the delay. The appropriate opportunity presented itself when the outside investigators sent by the papal nuncio arrived on the scene. “The nuns at last felt safe to reveal what they had long concealed” (p. 117). Brown concedes that none of the documents hint at what triggered this “reopening” of the case, but states with certainty that unlike the Pescia locals, the new team had no personal stake in defending Benedetta’s reputation. “Bit by bit, the ecclesiastical authorities chipped away at the miracles that had allegedly occurred through Sister Benedetta” (pp. 113–14) and “wrote down in great detail” what the nuns said (p. 111). Thus, Brown por-
trays a thorough "second investigation" by important, outside, competent high Churchmen.

My own judgment is that the case did not need to be reopened because it never had been closed, that a steady stream of gossip and complaints had been filtering out of the convent ever since Benedetta had been reinstated as abbess, and that the "investigators" were pretty sure of what their conclusions would be even before they arrived. What the documents clearly show is that there never was a second "processo," only a couple of perfunctory visits and a remarkably superficial gathering of hearsay. Document C is precisely what its title says it is—a "Brief discourse of the things that are said." The only nun spoken to was Abbess Benedetta herself; her statements, now as in the past, made it easy for anyone so predisposed to conclude that she was possessed and not a true visionary. The investigators did not bother to examine the physical evidence of stigmata, nor to question the other nuns. Instead, they sounded out in a very informal way, listing no names or dates, the opinions of some of Pescia's leading citizens. Although these were not founded on any hard evidence, they were uniformly critical of Benedetta, and cast aspersions on her country background and the rumored diabolic possession of her dead father. The document reveals a strong concern with Benedetta's implicit challenges against the authority of the Church Militant, and while it is critical of her Father Confessor's ineptness, it carefully exonerates him from any suspicion of complicity in Benedetta's behavior.

In accordance with their own recommendations, the investigators returned for a "visit" to hear from the other nuns. Document E is the result of this hurried examination: five pages with no dates, no names of witnesses, no questions, no logical progression from one "charge" or aspect of the case to another, no follow-up on self-evidently conflicting or suspicious testimony, and no effort to examine the physical evidence. What Brown takes to be "carefully indicating next to each charge just how many nuns had come forth" (p. 111) I read as a flurry of hearsay punctuated haphazardly with willfully vague attributions such as: "stated by two nuns, one of whom says she was present . . . One nun said this . . . Almost all the nuns say that . . . One nun adds that . . . " (frames 81–85). It was not a "processo" in any reasonable sense of the term, nor did its authors intend it to be. Much leeway must be granted to Brown in creating an exciting his-
torical narrative (pp. 117–31) from this document, and by providing a translation of a good portion of it (pp. 158–64) she allows readers to make an independent judgment.

Mine is that the clerics responsible for Document E knew before they arrived in Pescia that their superior, the papal nuncio, wanted Abbess Benedetta out of the way once and for all, especially now that he was sure she had lost the support of the local Pescia elite. It took very little effort, and no “chipping away” or pressing interrogation, to get the nuns to tell every bad thing they had seen Benedetta do, or heard about her, or perhaps even imagined about her. So anxious were the visitors to get out of town that they failed to obtain the confession by Benedetta that was always deemed necessary in bringing cases of this sort to a tidy conclusion, but this was rectified with the one-page report of November 5, 1623 (Document F).

Brown does not consider the question of who authored Document E, even though from her perspective it is the crucial one, with the crossed-out phrases and illegible hand as the scribe listened to Bartolomea tell about the mutual masturbation with Benedetta. The authors, it turns out, are the same two clerics who wrote the original and only “processo” back in 1619 (Document B). Figure 1 is a photograph from the first page (frame 56) of that document and Figure 2 is from the single page of Document E (frame 85) that records the masturbation. Even in this moment in 1622/23, when Brown says the scribe “lost his usual composure” (p. 118), the hand is unquestionably the same as that of 1619. If the handwriting merely reflected some unknown scribe, it would be no more than a curiosity that the high officials sent by the papal nuncio would have failed to bring along their own scribe and relied instead on a nervous local with rather constricted penmanship, but this is not the case. The cover sheet that in the original file binds Documents B and E together bears the title “Processo, e scritture fatte dal P. Lorenzo Geri da Pistoia, e dal P. Michelang. da Soragna in ordine a S. Benedetta Carlini di Vellano Monaca Theatina in Pescia” (frame 80). The word “fatte” surely indicates an active role in the case, and the person who assembled the documents and wrote the title was not recording for posterity an inconsequential scribe. Moreover, the same two friars turn up in Documents G and H as the new confessors for the Theatine nuns. They were Capuchins (Franciscan orbit), now placed in charge of the spiritual welfare of a convent specifically dedicated to Catherine of Siena
(Dominican), one which housed a false visionary who had patterned herself after that saint, just one little earthly triumph in the endless contest between Dominicans and Franciscans.

Nor are the two friars the only important link between the “processo” of 1619 and all that followed. It may be recalled that the papal nuncio who ordered the visits of 1623, Alfonso Giglioli, Bishop of Anglona, had initialed the original and thoroughly credulous account of Benedetta’s youth, early ecstasies, and spiritual marriage (Document J). Now, in the “Abstract of the Investigation of Benedetta” (Document D), the very events described earlier in the context of a potential saint were ascribed with certainty to the Devil. Brown links Alfonso Giglioli even more closely to Document D than I would, since she reports (p. 197 n. 7) that his “A.A.” initials are in the margin of the document, whereas I am unable to locate any initials anywhere on either copy of that document. Be that as it may, “A.A.” was the nuncio in 1623 and it was he who expressed confidence in Fathers Pistoia and Soragna (frame 109) and ordered them to take over as confessors for the Theatines (frame 110).

In treating the investigation of Benedetta’s “crimes” in such a casual and procedurally incorrect and insufficient way (Document E), as well as in closing the case with a statement (Document F) that she had confessed to demonic possession and was now a good nun (rather than with a signed confession), and in telling the highest officials (Documents I and Q) that much more could be added that need not be put on paper, the Bishop of Anglona and the friars who assisted him were in no sense behaving as proto gay rights activists. The documents make plain, I trust, why these men preferred to handle the whole matter as quietly as possible. Brown certainly is correct in speculating that Benedetta Carlini could have been tried for sodomy and that both she and Bartolomea could have been burnt at the stake (p. 133), but this theoretical possibility seems to me not to be very helpful in understanding how in reality this particular case was viewed.

The Bishop and the two friars once had considered that Benedetta might be a woman of outstanding holiness. When enough rumors about her difficulties as abbess reached them, however, they decided to accept any possible loss of prestige in having let her deceive them, and with as little fuss as possible to abandon her cause. There would be no second “processo,” just a quick visit to reevaluate the old materials, record the negative murmurings, and remove her as abbess. If
that was the clergy’s intent, the Theatine nuns at Holy Mary of Pes-
cia would not let matters be resolved so quietly. The malicious and
spiteful tone of Document E, when the sisters finally had their say,
testifies eloquently to the troubles that faced Benedetta and fore-
shadows the ordeal she would undergo. Even if she had been pre-
pared for her disrespectful charges lurking around until 3:00 A.M. to
watch their abbess hold hands and laugh with her priestly relative, or
peeking through a crack in the study door as she cut gold stars out of
tinsel, she must have been less prepared for the betrayal by her lover.

Bartolomea Crivelli, and only Bartolomea Crivelli, testified to the
mutual masturbation. Benedetta denied any recollection of such be-
havior, and no documents give any evidence that she was interro-
gated repeatedly, tortured, or pressed in any way to confess to this
“crime.” Brown evokes a powerful image of the response of the cler-
ics who listened to Bartolomea. The “testimony must have stunned”
(p. 118) them. “To anyone’s knowledge, there had been nothing like
it in any Italian convents . . . The officials who heard Bartolomea’s
story entirely lacked either an intellectual or an imaginative schema
that would incorporate the kind of behavior she described . . . that
two women should seek sexual gratification with each other was vir-
tually inconceivable” (p. 118). Brown proceeds to create an inquisi-
torial scene, with the investigators first establishing exactly what had
happened, then pressing for details on how long and how often the
lovemaking had gone on (p. 120), and then eagerly trying to deter-
mine Bartolomea’s cooperation in the affair (p. 121). Again, and with
due respect for the historian’s right to tell a good story, I can see
nothing in Brown’s translation (pp. 162–64) of the one page on
which all this is based, or in the document itself (frame 85), that sup-
ports her scenario. The very first words out of Bartolomea’s mouth
told all about how long and how often, and the next few phrases
spontaneously and self-righteously claimed that she had been taken
by force into Benedetta’s bed.

What is striking to me is how lightly the visiting friars treated the
entire matter. They apparently did not ask when the affair had
started, or if it was still going on, or if the abbess also preyed on other
nuns, or if Benedetta took on the appearance of her boy angel, Splen-
ditello, not only when she/he mounted Bartolomea but also when
this semi-literate companion observed her superior masturbating by
herself. Even on the one issue that ultimately did seem important to
the clerics: that the two nuns must have committed a sacrilege in re-
ceiving communion without having confessed to these "dishonest" acts, Bartolomea's statement that the angel Splenditello had assured her "there is no sin in it" was accepted without documented skepticism.

Equally striking are the differences between the version given in the original Document E (frame 85, with the crossouts) and that written in the later "Abstract" arranged in topical order (frames 44–49 or 147–50 of Document D) by officials who calmly summarized and wrapped up the case. In order to avoid inviting the reader into a quagmire of paleographic inquiry, I shall simply state my judgment that the crossouts in Document E betray no shaking hand or suddenly stunned male scribe whose writing became illegible. I think it was Bartolomea who hesitated, blushed, and changed her words as she unmasked her lover; it is her emotions that are preserved in Document E. The later version, Document D, describes the same events in a clear and even hand. It may or may not have been composed by Fathers Pistoia and Sovagna, and is evidently written in another hand. I suspect that the differences between it and Document E are the result more of male clerical reasoning and imagination than of a better recollection of things the scribe for Document E initially failed to record. Brown does not analyze the differences between the two documents; instead, in the Appendix (pp. 162–64) she gives an approximate translation of Document E, whereas in the text itself (pp. 117–27) her quotations and paraphrases are based on Document D.

Document D increases the frequency of Benedetta's and Bartolomea's encounters from "two or three" to "three or more" occasions weekly. It adds the entirely new assertions that "eight or ten" times the abbess, "to feel greater sensuality stripped naked as a newborn babe," and that "as many as twenty times by force le ha voluto baciare le parti pudente." Whether the cunnilingus occurred is a bit ambiguous, but neither that nor the quantitative issues are paramount here.

Whereas in Document E the recounting of the clinical details is interlaced only with claims that Benedetta used "force," in Document D there are repeated references to Benedetta's words of "love" and "melting affection" for her companion. Whether Bartolomea's testimony used these phrases and the scribe failed to include them, or whether the authors of Document D simply invented pillow talk they thought must have been exchanged, the fact is that the clergy ultimately had no lack of imagination or conceptual framework for describing love between two women. There is a tenderness, espe-
cially in the detailed description of physical behavior involving two very human females, in Document D quite lacking in its predecessor. Only further along does Document D shift to the prepubescent angel Splendidello, and as one might expect, the clinical description then becomes very vague and quickly gives way to the concern (entirely absent in Document E) over Bartolomea’s lack of confidence in her Father Confessor.

My sense is that the Bishop of Anglona and his associates understood Bartolomea’s assertions very well. They could have put both women on trial for sexual crimes, but I doubt that this option was ever considered seriously. Even leaving aside the angel Splendidello for the moment, their obvious point of reference in evaluating the mutual masturbation by two women would have been the recent and authoritative recommendation of Saint Charles Borromeo, which Brown duly quotes (pp. 7–8) but then seems to lose sight of: “If a woman fornicates by herself or with another woman she will do two years’ penance.” The clerics could instead have brought Abbess Benedetta to trial on charges of witchcraft, since much of the testimony over four years might easily have been seen as indicative of active cooperation on her part in the Devil’s doings. They could also have charged her with simulation of sanctity, and here the evidence was abundant. Instead, they chose to see the case in the manner least damaging to their own reputations and, coincidentally, least dangerous for Benedetta. She had been possessed by the Devil, so none of her actions had been of her free will; in short order she came to realize that she had been deceived, a sure sign that Satan now was defeated in this case, and so she could lead a quiet life at the convent without further attention from male clerics.

According to Brown, however, the obvious conclusion did not follow. “It would be up to the nuncio to determine in which direction the sentence and punishment would go” (p. 131). Brown concedes that there is absolutely no documentation linking any clerical official to Benedetta’s life imprisonment, only the single phrase in one unnamed nun’s “diary” entry of August 7, 1661: “she died in penitence, having spent thirty-five years in prison” (p. 132). A closer look at this “diary” reveals that it is not what we would normally think of as a diary. It is composed in at least two different hands and is a log book, such as convents regularly kept; the writer of the brief passage on Benedetta had taken over from her predecessor eight years earlier and in that time had filled only ten pages with short ac-
Fig. 1—Figures 1 and 2 courtesy of the Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Protocol Number 494/x.1 dated 4 February, 1987.
la fece condurre: e quando questa fuggiva, facem
serata più vische neve sera, e facevole sedere appresta
faccia condurre, e volentieri riuscisse d'istesso a lei, si un
uffici in esigen. E che qualche angelo della splendida cha
fumai di lei come quelle d'un bello giovane di 12, ano
foso angelo chiamato Rodolfo d'allo, bavìa l'entro de
forma d'un fanciullo di 9, o 9, anni; seguito far
quello angelo splendido, ch'era, a mani del Benet
faccendolo stare vivere in gioiosi, e facoltosi, e m
gli auuendo tutte le lettere ed insegna: la v
pigliare il l'inviuto de Budda e leggere la parte d
smirò gli altri due angeli del Benet
questo splendido la chiamò suo fanciullo, gli chiese la f
dopo la morte del Benet, facevole con ed augurò visual
queste che di fanciulli ch'era, vi affrescò di ed il e pour
vede, solemnità in corpo, e in anima, e affrescò far
sempre nova promesse. E se ne l BENET, a la era

Fig. 2
counts of new professions, deaths, and elections. There is no reason to assert that she had been at the convent back in the 1620s. Her description of Benedetta’s funeral tells us that the former abbess was dressed in her full habit and black veil, just like any other nun. The laypeople of Pescia “who always held her in high regard” (Pisa document, frame 2) thronged to the Church, and it was necessary to put up a barricade to prevent them from touching the corpse and possibly dismembering it as a wonderworking relic. She appears to have been accorded the usual Mass and burial in consecrated ground.

Obviously it was not the people of Pescia who punished Benedetta, and I strongly doubt that it was the papal nuncio. Not only is there no evidence that he did so, but Documents I and Q, which could not have been sent to high secular and clerical officials in Tuscany without his approval, closed the case with no indication that a sentence of any sort was appropriate. Indeed, the use of the word “stimato” and its accompanying conditional verb form indicate an opinion (admittedly a clear one in this case), not a formal judgment, absolute conclusion, or trial outcome. Here it may be useful to remind ourselves that Catholic Reformation clerics were very proud of their efforts to root out the devil and all his agents; there is no reason to think they would have hidden or destroyed documents revealing punishment of the wicked while retaining those that treated evil doings lightly. Brown speculates that perhaps Splendidello returned once again, “thereby pushing the authorities toward a decision they had not originally intended to make” (p. 133), but at some point it seems more useful to return to theories that at least bear some relationship to the documentation.

The people who carried out Benedetta’s imprisonment were the very nuns with whom she lived, the sisters who in Document E had poured out their hatred of her and her holier-than-thou, domineering ways when she had been abbess. They needed no official sentence or even sanction for what they did, certainly not from a papal nuncio. So long as the Father Confessor went along, the new abbess and her successors were free to punish Benedetta in any way they chose. And in this case it is perfectly understandable that Friars Soragna and Pistoia, and then their replacements, were happy with anything that kept this embarrassing case within the convent walls. The nuns did not forgive or forget about Bartolomea’s misdeeds either, even though her betrayal of Benedetta clearly had helped them dethrone their abbess. The same log book that records Benedetta’s death also
tells of Bartolomea's demise just eleven months earlier. For a long time she had been ill and "never" (in the limited memory of the writer, I would suppose) did cooking or other chores. Even though she appears not to have been incarcerated, "because of having been Benedetta's companion she suffered much tribulation" (Pisa document, frame I).

However differently Judith Brown and I understand what went on in the investigation, why it took the directions it did, and how it ended, I think we would agree that it was the sisters she lived with who secured Abbess Benedetta Carlini's downfall and then determined the torments of her last thirty-five years. Whether Benedetta also internalized their condemnation is something we never shall know.

Rutgers University

Response from Professor Judith Brown

I would like to thank Rudolph Bell for his time and effort in investigating the archival materials that form the basis of my book. His purpose in doing so was to understand more deeply several fundamental issues in the history of sexuality and religious mysticism. In the process, however, he appears to cast doubt on my abilities to research and analyze historical documents. In the next few pages I will argue that he has neither succeeded in his purpose nor in its unintended consequences. As is obvious from the document samples included in his report, the materials he examined in the archives of two different Italian cities are often hard to read and even harder to interpret. Anyone who undertakes the enterprise is embarking on a difficult task.

Because scholars who do not labor in the Florentine archives have less tolerance for the arcane minutiae that are the stuff of Florentine historical scholarship, I shall try to be brief and will address only what I consider to be his major points. To make a long story short, he did indeed discover some errors in my description of several documents, but none that affect the chronology of the story and none that warrant his interpretation of events.

Let me turn to the matter of documents B and E, which are at the core of his interpretation. Bell claims that my account of two investigations, one conducted by the provost of Pescia and the other by the nuncio, Alfonso Giglioli, is based on a false reading of the documents. He claims that there was only one investigation, possibly
conducted in two phases, and that this investigation was held from the outset in 1619 by ecclesiastical officials sent by the nuncio, Alfonso Giglioli. His reasons for thinking this are twofold. First, that documents B and E are written by the same hand and E, we both agree, was part of the nuncio’s investigation. Second, documents B and E are bound together by a cover sheet that bears the title “Proceso e scritture fatte dal P. Lorenzo Geri da Pistoia . . . e dal P. Michelang. da Soragna . . .” These two friars were involved in the nuncio’s investigation.

There are two reasons why Bell’s interpretation will not work. First, whereas the first investigation began on May 27, 1619, Alfonso Giglioli did not become nuncio until 1622. Indeed, in May 1619, when the investigation began, he was not even a bishop. Second, the Provost, and not the nuncio or his emissaries, is the only official mentioned in the first investigation. It is he who is conducting the proceedings. Let me quote from the beginning of Document B:

On the 27th day of May, 1619
On the first visit, the provost [my italics] saw on the hands, feet, and side of Benedetta signs of dry blood . . .

It did not escape my attention that Documents B and E are written by the same hand. But that fact alone tells us only that the same person wrote (and did not necessarily author) both of those documents. *Miscellanea Medicea* 376, ins. 28, is a file in which several documents appear in two or three copies, apparently intended for a variety of purposes and readers. Contrary to Bell’s assertion, no materials are “bound” together, but rather loose sheets are assembled in unbound subfiles so that one cannot be certain that any one set of covers contains the same materials now that they contained at all times in the past. Finally, the documents sometimes refer to other documents which no longer exist. My point here is that a number of hypothetical scenarios, which I’ll omit for the sake of brevity, can be constructed to account for the handwriting, the current placement of documents B and E, and the note about the Capuchin Fathers, written in a different hand, on the cover sheet. Neither handwriting nor placement are sure indicators of who assembled the documents, when they were assembled, or even who the original authors of the texts may have been since some of them are copies of other texts. It is far safer to base one’s interpretation, as I have done, on the contents of the text, not assumptions about its assemblage.
Bell further suggests that I did not realize that A.A. and the nuncio are one and the same. Obviously, he overlooked my note 7, p. 197, which states “... the initials A.A. ... were the initials of the nuncio, Alfonso, Bishop of Anagnia.”

With regard to Document F, entitled “Last Report” (*Ultima Informatione*), Bell comments that there is “no indication that it is a ‘Last Report.’” I do not want to quibble, but since he has found no later reports and since the document is entitled “Last Report,” it is not unreasonable for me to treat it as though the writers intended it to be a “Last Report.”

Before leaving questions of document identification, Bell does correctly point out that Document D does not contain the nuncio’s seal or initials, whereas I said that it does. The seal appears in document G and the initials in document J. Here again, however, it is obvious from the content of document D that it was compiled at the nuncio’s behest. Both Bell and my book are in agreement on this point. I’ll not go into the series of post archival mishaps that led to my error and while not excusing it, will simply point out that it does not alter the attribution and does not affect the substance of my argument.

Let me turn to matters of historical interpretation. Bell begins with the question of sexual labels and suggests that his purpose in re-reading and reinterpreting the documents is to throw fresh light on important topics in the history of sexuality. After his initial assertion, however, he quickly drops the subject and never quite returns. One has to ask after reading his article, what important new issues he has raised about sexual identities, sexual relations, and sexual perceptions in early modern Europe. There were none that I could see.

Yet despite this lack of fresh perspective, Bell argues that my handling of sexual issues is confused. He questions my use of the term “lesbian” and ascribes various motives to my concern with lesbianism beyond those stated by me on p. 4 of my book. He also argues that the term “lesbian” creates confusion because it does not appear in the documents, and suggests that my explanation for its use is buried in an endnote. Since many of the concerns about the historical appropriateness of the term “lesbian” have also been voiced about the use of “anorexia” in Bell’s own work, I am surprised that he was confused by my terminology. I am especially puzzled because as early as p. 17 of the Introduction I discuss the absence of the term “lesbian” as a sexual label in the seventeenth century. It is this discus-
sion that leads to the lengthy endnote on pp. 171–73. The subject again comes up with particular reference to Benedetta Carlini's situation throughout chapter 5. In the Introduction, chapter 5, and the endnotes, I state that "lesbian" did not exist as a sexual category, that none of the protagonists in this story could have seen themselves or others as lesbians, and that I use the term as a kind of shorthand to discuss a set of documents that are unique in giving us a glimpse into the sexual relations between women and how those relations were perceived in the premodern era. From the beginning to the end of the book then my position on the question is clear.

Another problem, according to Bell, is that I am unclear in my own mind about whether I am dealing with an investigation or a trial. He claims that despite my use of the term investigation in two chapter titles, in various ways throughout the text and in the list of documents in the Appendix, I incorrectly render the term "processo" as trial. I have just reread the text as carefully as I can and do not see the word trial anywhere except in a quote of an archivist's description and in the Appendix, where I use it for reasons explained below. Throughout the story I refer to the events as an investigation. Nowhere do I claim, as Bell suggests, that Benedetta or any of the other witnesses were subject to an Inquisitorial court or that they were tortured.

The only places where I use the term trial are in the literal translations, as in the document titles in the Appendix, and there, precisely because I did not want readers to get the wrong impression, I placed the Italian word "processo" in parenthesis next to the word "trial." This, I thought, would let scholars know exactly what was being discussed.

As to my claim that Benedetta was initially exculpated, Bell argues instead that she was punished from the start. His claim is based on Document B, which according to him, states that until July 1620 she was ordered to observe total "clausura," thus cutting her off completely from the outside world.

As I state in my book, after Benedetta's mystical marriage on May 26, 1619, all the women in the religious community, and not just Benedetta, were forbidden to talk with outsiders about her experiences. Whether this prohibition was effectively enforced, however, is as doubtful as is the enforcement of the community's unofficially enclosed way of life during those years. In any event, there is reason to believe that during the time of her alleged seclusion from outsid-
ers, Benedetta had at least one visitor, her mother, who came to see her some time after 23 July, 1619, when the holy ring was disclosed to the investigators (see Document D, section "Dello Sposalitio").

More to the point, Bell’s account of Benedetta’s punishment is based on a misinterpretation of document B. Here is what it says:

On the 26th day of July, 1620

On the visit made to conclude the enclosure and His Holiness and his Vicar having come and finding Benedetta with all the others in the choir . . .

*Nella visita fatta per terminare la clausura—entrato S.S. ed il suo Signor Vicario—trovata la Benedetta in choro con tutte le altre . . .*

Enclosure in this case is not linked directly to Benedetta. Indeed, what “*clausura*” (enclosure) refers to is the Theatines’ request to become a regular convent with official enclosure. The purpose of this visit on 26 July is partly to conclude the business of enclosure prior to granting it two days later. On July 28, 1620 Benedetta Carlini is the first abbess of the fully enclosed convent. Bell’s interpretation would have us believe that in the space of two days Benedetta went from being punished by *clausura* to becoming the first abbess of the convent. Benedetta’s story contains many miracles but this is not one of them.

Neither is it plausible that the ecclesiastical officials who, according to Bell, conducted the investigation over a four-year period, would leave the question of punishment up to the nuns of the convent. While I agree with Bell that the nuns wanted Benedetta out of the way and may even have recommended that she be imprisoned within the convent for the rest of her life, such severe punishment in early modern convents could not have been imposed without the consent of the ecclesiastical officials who supervised the convent. In this particular case it is not likely that the nuncio who took such interest in the case would leave its disposition to anyone other than himself and his own men. It is probable that his office “sentenced” (meaning the carrying out of a punishment under official orders) Benedetta for her misdeeds, which in contemporary eyes were both crimes and sins. That the authorities in disposing of the case were, moreover, concerned with silencing Benedetta is not an original interpretation with Bell, but is a recurring theme throughout my book.

Turning next to the father confessor’s role in the handling of the case, Bell emphasizes that there was no one better prepared to moni-
tor her experiences than her confessor, who records his efforts to bring her under control in Documents L, M, N, O, P. Bell faults my analysis of the confessor’s role for not including a discussion of these documents and not listing them in the Appendix.

First, there is nothing in these documents that allows us to say that they were written or even dictated by the confessor. Take, for example, document M, described by Bell as “A separate folio from her confessor recommending that Benedetta combat her spiritual aridity and lack of internal peace with mortifications and destruction of her will.” The document, like the rest of the group, is nothing of the sort. Rather, it is a description of some of Benedetta’s visions. It is not the confessor’s recommendations, but God’s that are recorded. Again, let me cite from the document:

February 10, 1620. In the morning before daytime she developed a great desire to know the will of God and what was most pleasing and acceptable to him. God himself [my italics] told her union and peace [were most pleasing to him] because He rested in it. She asked how one could acquire that peace and union and he answered that with mortification.

All’10 febbraio, 1620. La mattina avanti giorno le venne un gran desiderio di sapere la volontà di Dio e quello le fusse più grato e più accetto. Le fu da l’istesso Dio detto che l’unione e la pace perchè in quella esso riposa. Essa domandò come si potea aquistare la detta pace et unione e le rispose che con la mortificazione.

The document then goes on to additional advice and to the recollection of other visions. This is the main concern of document M and the other documents, which deal almost exclusively with Benedetta’s visions of Mary Magdalen, St. Gertrude, St. Vincent Martyr, St. Thecla, and a surprisingly large array of holy figures for someone who allegedly was experiencing a period of “spiritual aridity.” It is these saints, and not the confessor as Bell claims regarding document N, who gave most of the advice on how to live a pious life, how to confess, etc. Although the confessor’s admonitions come across clearly in document P, even here the account is in the third person and is obviously not written by the confessor, who would write about himself in the first person if he were the author.

As for the father confessor’s background as a lawyer, his skepticism about some of Benedetta’s claims, his efforts to test her, and his warnings about her visionary experiences, these are well documented in my book (see pp. 38–39, 52, 60–61, and 67, inter alia). Bell is not adding anything new to this aspect of the case. But the fact remains that the confessor waffled through many of the events and in the end he did believe Benedetta and let matters get out of hand. This
is not just my opinion but that of the nuncio’s officials. Again, let me cite from document C:

He was and is too ready to believe without proof [*è stato et è troppo facile a credere senza prova e esperienza*] and thus gave the devil free rein to keep on deluding this poor creature.

Finally, let me turn to what Bell calls the perfunctory nature of the investigation of 1622–1623. The text and the Appendix to my book contain large enough selections from the documents that readers can determine for themselves whether or not the investigation was perfunctory, but since Bell claims that the officials did not even bother to question the other nuns, let me quote from document D:

Having gone to Pescia with the orders given to us by Your Illustrious Reverence at Siena, and after considering the investigation that was undertaken of the events that took place in the person of Mother Sister Benedetta Carlini of Veliano . . . the previous discourse was made, which, after being considered by Your Illustrious Reverence, you judged it best that we return with new orders to visit not only Mother Benedetta, but *all the Mothers of that monastery*, [my italics] so that the truth may be better ascertained.

Now having gone and visited her, [and] *all the nuns* [my italics], we have discovered the following in addition to the other time . . .

There are many other problems with Bell’s reading of the documents as well as his reading of my book, to which he attributes statements I did not make. To take one last example, he faults me for referring to a book of *ricordi* as a “diary.” This is the commonly used word for this genre even though it is well known that such books are not modern type diaries and that they were frequently continued by several generations of writers. He further suggests that I claim that the nun who recorded Benedetta’s death in this book of *ricordi* had actually been witness to the events of the 1620s. I make no such claim.

The list of examples could go on, but I think that a more comprehensive refutation of minor criticisms at this point is superfluous. Neither the cause of scholarship nor the readers’ patience are well served by such an exercise. In the end, Bell’s criticism fails to convince not because of the number of small details that he gets wrong, but because his basic reading of the documents is built on the wrong premises and because he does not develop any new and significant interpretations about the history of sexuality and of religious mysticism.

*Stanford University*
From Rudolph Bell:

Judith Brown's response to my review raises new questions about documentation, questions that ought to be resolved if we are to build a firmer base for more fruitful lines of interpretation.

Whereas she writes that I claim that the investigation in 1619 was "by ecclesiastical officials sent by the nuncio," I make absolutely no such claim or suggestion. We are in agreement, shown amply in both of our preceding communications, that Alfonso Giglioli was not a papal nuncio at that time. What does tie Giglioli, who received his bishopric on July 19, 1619, clearly to the early phases of Benedetta's visionary experiences is Document J, obviously not Document B, and on the many questions raised by Document J Brown makes no comment. The plainly visible paleographic evidence linking Documents B and E, against which Brown offers only unspecified hypothetical scenarios, refers to the two Capuchin fathers I contend were involved in both phases of the investigation. The presence of the provost of Pescia in 1619 is not and never was in doubt.

Contrary to Brown's assertion, I cannot have "overlooked" her note 7, p. 197 since my review specifies exactly that note in pointing out her incorrect statement that the margins of Document D contain the "A.A." initials referring to Giglioli. The initials are found, as she now concedes, on the cover of Document J, one of the 8 documents (out of a total of 17) that are missing from her original list of pertinent sources and one that she quotes at length in her text but on two occasions, mentioned in my review, misattributes in her endnotes.

The supposed title "Last Report" (Ultima[?] Informatione[?]) of Document F is a dubious transcription by Brown of a phrase clearly in a different hand than the document itself, a hand that is typical of nineteenth-century cacography and therefore, at best, an opinion by an unknown person who altered the original document some two hundred years after it first had been written.

If Judith Brown really means to assert that the true authors of Documents L, M, N, O, and P are God and His saints, and chooses to leave historical verification at such a level, I would not wish to interfere with an individual's private beliefs.

Finally, in attempting to refute my statement that Document C describes a visit during which no nuns other than Benedetta were interrogated, Brown obfuscates the issue by providing readers with a partial quotation from Document D. Document D is an entirely different piece of evidence, one that we both agree was composed at a
later time, after the return visit described in Document E when the other nuns ultimately were allowed to speak out. Yet even the very words quoted by Brown leave little doubt that the other nuns were not questioned during the earlier visit (the one described in Document C). The persistent conflations of Documents C, D, and E that I found so disappointing in Brown’s book continues here in her response to my review.

I trust that questions of documentation now are resolved, subject of course to any interested scholar’s consultation of the microfilm or the originals themselves. The mysteries of Florentine archives are not all that impenetrable or arcane, and it is my hope that a reader prepared with accurate information about what they contain concerning Abbess Benedetta Carlini may be in a better position to consider the deeper issues raised by her travail.

From Judith Brown:

When I submitted my reply to Rudolph Bell’s note on my book, I indicated to the editors that I did not wish to continue the exchange beyond that point because the issues raised were not of any historical significance. The editors agreed that they too wanted no further debate. Nothing since has made me doubt the wisdom of this position, so I stand by my previous statement and let the readers judge for themselves.